“Librarian for hire”: contracting a librarian’s services to external departments*

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In a time of financial constraints, Harvard Medical School’s Countway Library has found a way to acquire additional funding to expand its services while integrating librarians further into the medical school organization. This paper describes the contractual arrangement between the library and a medical school department and shows how a professional librarian can be integrated into the institutional environment and take on new roles that are both meaningful and satisfying. As liaison to the curriculum development department of the medical school, the librarian was involved in curriculum planning, software support, and computing facility support. Increased understanding and cooperation has evolved between the contracting departments, and the problems encountered by the liaison have been minor. The contractual arrangement was not only successful but also provided a model for future outreach projects.

INTRODUCTION

As an information professional, the health sciences librarian brings to an institution a unique blend of “the knowledge bases of medicine and the technical expertise of librarianship with clearheaded problem solving, analytical competence, and well-honed interpersonal and organizational skills” [1]. This powerhouse of talent traditionally has been underutilized by most parent institutions. Librarians traditionally work within the library’s walls, performing conventional public- and technical-services tasks related to collection development, management, and access.

These roles have defined the librarian and perhaps limited the librarian’s contribution to the institution at large.

During the past three decades, new roles have emerged as librarians became involved in problem-based learning curricula, developed course-integrated bibliographic instruction, provided clinical librarian services, and participated in integrated advanced information management systems (IAIMS) planning and projects [2–6]. These types of activities increase exposure to and foster partnerships with teaching, clinical, and research faculty. A key element in the successful evolution of librarianship will be the creation of expanded roles within the institution and the forging of cross-departmental partnerships [7].

This paper describes an effort by Harvard Medical School’s Countway Library to create an expanded role for one of its librarians. The immediate purposes for doing so were to provide an avenue for the library to become more integrated into the curriculum of the medical school, to develop new and stronger part-

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nerships with an influential and sometimes competing department, and to explore alternatives to a "fee for service" model of library services.

The Countway Library of Medicine serves the faculty, students, and staff of three professional schools—medical, dental, and public health—as well as the membership of the Boston Medical Library and the Massachusetts Medical Society. In the fall of 1992, the library entered into an arrangement with the medical school's Office for Educational Development (OED), whereby one of the information services librarians would devote 15% of her work time to the OED. During the past few years, the medical school has been rigorously reviewing personnel utilization and requiring justification for all new positions. Because this arrangement with the OED was experimental, it was important that the librarian position remain 100% in the library's personnel budget, even though a portion of it would be subsidized by another department. Funds for the fiscal year were transferred from the OED to the library as part of this contractual agreement.

**CONTRACTING LIBRARIANS' SERVICES**

Generally, librarian liaison and contract work has followed one of two models. A librarian may develop a relationship with a department (or departments) and report that department's views back to the library, usually in the area of collection development [8]. Alternatively, a librarian may be hired as a subcontractor to supplement existing library personnel who cannot manage the workload or cover all hours of public service without additional help.

Countway's contractual work has been unique in that no collection development activity has been involved, the position did not include the reporting functions of a liaison, and traditional librarian skills were not the main focus. The contracting department wanted an instructor, problem solver, and team player with a unique point of view. The position evolved out of mutual recognition of the substantial amount of time already devoted by the librarian to student teaching and curriculum-support activities. The event that precipitated formalization of this arrangement was the OED's decision to hire an information services librarian to conduct a study of the student computing facility.

**CURRICULUM SUPPORT AT HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL**

The OED was created in the early 1980s to support the medical school's decision to adopt a problem-based approach to teaching medicine, the New Pathway [9-11]. This office was charged with coordinating the planning and implementation of the innovative curriculum. As the New Pathway has been expanded to encompass all four years of the curriculum, the office also has expanded to provide all curriculum-support services, including educational computing. The OED now has a staff of approximately sixty. A separate building was erected on campus, the Medical Education Center, to house the OED, lecture and tutorial rooms, Skills Areas (labs), Society Areas (combination office, study, and social centers), and a student computing lab with approximately forty computers.

During the 1980s, both the library and the OED developed services designed to meet medical students' computing needs. The respective responsibilities were not always clear: there was some confusion, duplicative efforts, and competition for computing resources. With organizational changes in both the library and the OED in 1990, opportunities opened up for the development of new relationships.

In 1992, the OED decided to conduct an analysis of its student computing program. A major component of this analysis was an examination of the use of the computing facilities in the Medical Education Center. Medical students had expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the computing environment at Harvard. The OED asked the library to conduct this analysis.

One of the information services librarians was hired and spent sixty hours during five weeks studying the computing center. She wrote three interim reports and one final report for the OED. The OED subsequently asked for the same librarian to assist with their operation and was willing to make a financial commitment to seal this pact.

Because this was a new venture, there was no formal job description. In any case, a formal job description implies a different type of employer-employee relationship than was envisioned for the new arrangement. The library wanted this relationship to develop along the lines of a professional, collegial consultation, with the librarian's unique talents used to solve appropriate information management problems and to provide instruction. A general agreement concerning responsibilities was developed, and the librarian provided periodic reports detailing the work performed, the persons contacted, and the problems and issues that had arisen.

**THE LIBRARIAN'S FUNCTIONS**

The role of the librarian has grown over time, but the work has focused primarily on tasks and projects involving curriculum planning, software support, and computing facility support.

Curriculum planning and support activities have encompassed working directly with the curriculum coordinators and teaching faculty, including tutors,
course directors, and clerkship directors. Examples of these activities include attending monthly curriculum coordinators' meetings and working with faculty to find opportunities for designing and incorporating student searching exercises into specific courses. The coordinators and faculty have been provided with information about the library's program on knowledge-searching skills [12] and have been trained in the use of MEDLINE, HOLLIS (Harvard University's online catalog), the campus e-mail system, the Internet, and networked student software programs.

The curriculum planning component also has included working directly with students: preparing and giving presentations in elective courses regarding relevant research resources, providing feedback to students on their searching skills, and being available for individual consultations.

The software support role has included participation in a student network committee, preparing software documentation, providing support for a residency selection software program, encouraging and supporting student use of MEDLINE and the Internet, and providing training and backup to student computing assistants. In the area of student training, the librarian has been providing lectures, demonstrations, and handouts; collaborating with student computing assistants; and providing documentation and opportunities for small-group sessions and one-on-one consultations.

The software-support role was expanded to include providing individual consultations with faculty in their offices. While setting up access to the library's networked MEDLINE program and conducting some on-site training, the librarian discovered that many faculty members were unfamiliar and uncomfortable with their computers. Unexpectedly, some of the consultation time was spent dealing with hardware and other technical issues as opposed to software issues. Faculty members have been provided with macros to facilitate access to the library's programs and have been assisted in acquiring network connections and new hardware.

The computing facility-support role, which began with the detailed use study, has been expanded to include participation in a rather extensive redesign of that facility, daily oversight of a student computing area in the library, and periodic assistance in monitoring student exams given via computer.

**CONTRACT EVALUATION**

Every situation has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of the Countway contract have been quite considerable. Both organizations have gained a great deal of understanding of the other's role. Goals, missions, responsibilities, and strengths, as well as weaknesses, have been shared. Communication and cooperation have increased on multiple levels between the departments. Both departments are enthusiastic about seeking further opportunities for collaboration.

There have been some disadvantages as well. As the library entered into a closer relationship with the day-to-day workings of the OED, some erroneous assumptions about the library's mission, goals, and agendas surfaced. For example, there was some expectation that as the library's capability to provide user workstations increased, most of these resources would be devoted to meeting the computing needs of medical students. The library's constituency is considerably larger than that of the OED, and the library has had to balance the allocation of its resources to meet the needs of all of its users.

Another disadvantage has been the absence of the librarian from the library for approximately five hours per week. No one else was hired to cover the 15% of her time spent on OED activities. The library had to adjust its staffing of some services (especially in its mediated searching program) to compensate. The librarian herself also has had to deal with time-management issues. She has had to set priorities and handle conflicts between library work and work for the OED. Working in a shared office environment, her colleagues found it difficult to know when she was working on OED-related projects. As the senior member of the department, the librarian found it awkward to refuse requests for assistance from departmental colleagues and other library staff. During a maternity leave, colleagues assumed the OED responsibilities.

Overall, the benefits have far outweighed the negatives. The OED has asked to renew the contract for a second year and to increase the time commitment to 25%. After assessing the potential impact of that increase, the library has agreed to pursue the contract for an additional year.

This model arrangement involved neither a formal job description nor a detailed contract, and some practical matters were not addressed before embarking on this new relationship. Although no insurmountable problems arose, future outreach projects would benefit from additional planning. The concerns fall primarily into three categories: communications, work space, and staffing. How fully will the librarian be integrated into the second department? Will she be expected to attend departmental meetings and in-service training? To whom does the liaison report, and what channels of communication will be used routinely? What types of reports will be expected? Will the librarian have a work space and access to equipment (computer, network, fax, copier) and support services at the contracting department's site? Will she be expected to be "on site" during all of the contracted time, or may work be done at the primary office location? How will vacations and leaves of ab-
sence be handled? Will anyone from the contracting department contribute to the librarian’s annual evaluation, and, if so, what form will that involvement take? What criteria will be used to judge the success of the collaboration? Anticipation and resolution of these issues in advance will facilitate the successful integration of liaisons into other departments.

CONCLUSION

Has the library achieved the objectives set out when it entered into this relationship? Yes and no. The library still does not play a very significant role with respect to the medical school’s curriculum. However, the library has developed links with faculty members who are intimately involved with re-assessing the curriculum, so there is considerable hope that the library’s role may expand. The contacts with the faculty facilitated by this arrangement have permitted the library to demonstrate its formerly underappreciated expertise in the technical arena. The OED is a high-profile, influential department, and the library’s partnership with that department has enhanced the library’s image. Finally, this arrangement has tested the feasibility of using a contractual model to deliver services to other departments in the medical school.

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